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ABSTRACT

The Majors Fair is a campus event that showcases academic departments and programs for undergraduate college students deciding majors and minors. Including elements of career counseling, academic advising, and peer mentoring, the purpose of the Majors Fair is to provide information needed for decision making through easy access to faculty, staff, advisors, and committed students in a convenient one-stop setting. It also includes representatives from essential student service areas on campus such as the Career Center and Counseling with the goal of promoting awareness and use of such services. This paper provides an overview of the Majors Fair as it exists at California State University, Northridge with general event-planning guidelines applicable to other college and university campuses. Appendix A is California State University Northridge (CSUN) Majors Fair Planning Timeline. (JDM)

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The Majors Fair: Helping College Students Decide On Majors

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What Is The Majors Fair?

The Majors Fair is a campus event that showcases academic departments and programs for undergraduate college students deciding majors and minors. Including elements of career counseling, academic advising, and peer mentoring, the purpose of the Majors Fair is to provide information needed for decision-making through easy access to faculty, staff, advisors, and committed students in a convenient one-stop setting. In addition to information concerning academic departments, programs, degree requirements, and possible career options, the Majors Fair also includes representatives from essential student service areas on campus such as the Career Center and Counseling with the goal of promoting awareness and use of such services.

The presentation of a Majors Fair type-of-event is well-established on many campuses throughout the United States. The history of the event's success at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) clearly demonstrates the value of the Majors Fair as an effective tool in the process of choosing majors and minors. This paper will provide an overview of the Majors Fair as it exists at CSUN with general event-planning guidelines applicable to other college and university campuses.

The Majors Fair, Major Selection, & Career Counseling

Choosing a major is a primary task for some 13 million undergraduate students enrolled in over 10,000 institutions of higher learning nationwide. It is estimated that 20-50% of students entering college are undecided about a major and that 75% change their major one or more times during their academic careers (Gordon, 1995). At California State University, Northridge, approximately 2,000 undergraduate students of the total 30,000 are officially undecided at the present time. In addition to those officially listed as undecided in the campus record system, a significant portion of the first and second year students, as well as some third year students, remain uncommitted in terms of academic major, with an unknown number of students considering the possibility of completing a minor.

Most students directly relate college majors to professional work after college, making the decision regarding a major a complex career and occupational decision rather than a short-term

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commitment to courses. Because the selection of a major represents the beginning of career planning for most college students, effective methods and strategies to assist exploring students are urgently needed. The Majors Fair has proven to be helpful to CSUN students who are exploring and deciding majors and minors by providing access to the information, people, and resources to facilitate decision-making; given its history of success at CSUN, the Majors Fair is certainly worthy of consideration by other campuses seeking to assist their students with major selection.

Career development strategies are integrated into three specific components of the Majors Fair. Pre-event workshops, a program/handout distributed to each student as they enter the event, and a designated "Help Station" located within the event all reflect established career counseling methodologies to assist students to negotiate the Majors Fair and maximize the event's usefulness. The one-hour pre-event workshops involve the introduction of the Holland RIASEC system through a modified version of Bolles' Party Exercise (Berg-Kolin, 1997) and related materials in order to suggest academic areas for exploration at the Majors Fair. An event program is distributed at the entrance to the Majors Fair with a listing of all the campus majors and minors by college division and the college sign color key. With the program, students can begin to understand the campus thematic organizational and interest area structure. In addition, the inclusion of a "Help Station" staffed by career graduate students and career counselors can provide immediate, individual, one-stop assistance to students requiring help with exploration plans and resources for follow-up.

A Brief History Of The Majors Fair At CSU Northridge

CSU Northridge has offered a Majors Fair in its present format each Spring semester since 1998, with a precursor of the event ("Undeclared Majors Day") offered in 1992. The event has been refined over the past four years, with significant revisions from the first presentation to the second, and fewer, though still constant, revisions during the past three years. The Majors Fair is recognized campus-wide as an essential student service, and enjoys wide support from students, administrators, faculty, and staff. The event typically attracts an audience of 350-600+ students from the campus of 30,000 students; this is considered a significant turnout on this public commuter campus in the San Fernando Valley area of southern California. Coordinated by the Advising Resource Center/EOP (the academic advising center for undecided undergraduate students at CSUN), the Majors Fair targets the wider population of all students making decisions concerning the 135 majors including departmental options and 54 possible minors available on the campus. Attendance statistics demonstrate that the event attracts a surprisingly wide cross-section of the university population in spite of consciously-targeted outreach to the freshman and sophomore students who would be expected to be exploring majors. Most of the attendees are listed in the campus records system with declared majors, and a significant number have earned sufficient units for junior, senior, and even graduate class standing, statistics which have remained fairly constant throughout the event's history.

Planning The Majors Fair – Critical Elements For Success

Campus Support

Support and participation by faculty, staff, and students in the various majors is crucial to the success of the Majors Fair. Gaining the support and participation of the campus requires awareness of campus politics and campus culture, especially if the Majors Fair is in the introductory phase or if significant changes are in process from previous formats. Obtaining the backing of the most influential people, whether in formal or informal positions of authority, can significantly facilitate the event planning process and contribute to a successful outcome. The student audience expects knowledgeable, friendly, and helpful representatives from each department and program to be available at the Majors Fair, and it is the responsibility of the event planners to deliver the promised resource individuals. At CSUN, support for the event is generated through the clout of the highest ranking members of the campus community –Provost, Vice Presidents, Deans, Department Chairs, Directors, and Coordinators, with representatives from each of the eight academic colleges being responsible for the confirmation of participants. The Director of EOP, the primary sponsor of the event, presents the concept at meetings such as the Deans Council and sends follow-up letters to the Deans. The event coordinator subsequently appears at the Council of Department Chairs meeting with flyers announcing the date and the college representatives and sends follow-up letters to each Department Chair. In order to maximize participation, announcement of the date is publicized several months in advance of the event, allowing support networks to build. At CSUN, the announcement process begins early in the Fall semester for the annual Spring Majors Fair (see the Timeline – Appendix A).

Support by general faculty members is also important if class outreach publicity for the Majors Fair is conducted. At CSUN, a carefully selected group of courses common to first and second year students is identified for class mailings of flyers which are dependent upon the instructor's willingness for distribution. The reputation of the event can provide support if the previous events have been successful and well-received; for first-time events, education about the goals and purpose of the event will be required. Support from high level administrators can flow throughout the colleges, departments, programs, advisement centers, and student service areas for both active participation and general support in the form of allowing posters or stacks of announcement flyers to be available for distribution in high traffic areas. For example, at CSUN, support by dorm staff translates into posters with reminder flyers mounted in each dorm hallway. Support can also mean direct funding or lobbying for funds for the event expenses. The Majors Fair at CSUN also builds support through its commitment to requesting feedback and evaluation from its participants and its efforts to continually improve and refine the event. Campus members are most apt to support and participate in an event that very obviously demonstrates its commitment to high quality student service.

Funding

Advanced planning for funding for the Majors Fair is crucial to its success, and the drafting of a detailed budget proposal represents one of the first tasks in the planning process (see the Timeline – Appendix A). Researching the actual costs for anticipated expenses is critical, as is the determination of policies and procedures for obtaining funds and securing supplies, all of which is very campus-specific. Creative sources for funding and cost-effective means of achieving desired results can be particularly useful in planning a successful Majors Fair.

Enlisting the assistance of people with creative talent for poster design and graphics, as well as those with significant knowledge of campus policies, procedures, history, and culture, can greatly facilitate the Majors Fair planning process.

At CSUN, direct funding for the Majors Fair is provided through three primary sources: the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP); the academic affairs division of Undergraduate Studies; and the campus student government, Associated Students. Individual departments and programs provide their own printed materials for distribution at their tables as well as any visual aids or displays, and also cover salaries as applicable for their personnel. At the present time, direct funding for the Majors Fair runs approximately $7500 per event, with the majority of costs represented by publicity and handout materials (approximately $3900 including paid ads in the campus newspaper) and refreshments (approximately $3000 including box lunches for the faculty and other event staff). Additional funding needs at CSUN include: room and equipment, sign language interpreting services, signs and tape, tablecloths, staff and faculty nametags, balloons, and photography processing. Need for funding on other campuses may vary considerably.

Funding through the CSUN student government requires a structured lobbying process and is usually secured with the co-sponsorship of the career graduate student organization, the California Career Development Association/CSUN Student Chapter (CCDA/CSUN), whose members function as volunteer staff for the Majors Fair, earning academic fieldwork credit. Additional support for the Majors Fair is supplied by the local and campus business community in the form of donated door prizes such as gift certificates for meals, books, and actual products such as clothing or gourmet food items. Donors are acknowledged in paid ads in the campus newspaper on the day of the event and in the event program distributed to each attendee.

Timing

The timing of the Majors Fair can greatly contribute to its overall success. The ideal date would have a minimum number of competing events and commitments for students and event staff. Regardless of whether the event takes place in the Fall or, as at CSUN, in the Spring semester (which permits a useful several-month planning process that begins with the start of the academic year in the Fall), it is advisable to schedule the Majors Fair comfortably after the start of classes but before midterm exams begin. The day of the week is also important; events held on a Monday or a Friday may be less likely to attract optimal attendance. Midweek dates have proven to be the most successful at CSUN and allow for adequate last-minute publicity. However, always check for competing events on any given day. Particular note should be taken of events that may pull away students in targeted populations such as first year students or events that may impact campus staff's ability to participate. Time of day for the event also must be considered; at CSUN, a four-hour block of time on the same day as a noontime music series has been effective. Weather is also a factor worthy of consideration; cold or rain may attract people indoors, as has been the case at CSUN for two of the four Majors Fairs scheduled in late February.

Site/Facility

Selecting the location for the event may be one of the most important decisions involved with planning a campus Majors Fair. Regardless of the size and scope of the event, a successful

location will be in an area where students regularly circulate or pass, with foot-traffic often a main source of attendance. Making a list of all of the different activities and services and their timing within the event can help determine a suitable location that will support all of the components in the best possible way. Also worthy of consideration is the flow of foot traffic throughout the room during the event with attention to the prevention of bottlenecks and isolated tables.

At CSUN, the Majors Fair is held in the University Student Union building, in the same site as the job fairs, in the only room on the campus that is really feasible in terms of size and accessibility to student traffic. Because this large multipurpose room is used daily for a wide range of events, advanced reservation several months ahead is required. Room arrangement at CSUN is determined by the campus organizational structure into eight academic colleges comprised of all of the majors and minors. The academic areas are situated around the perimeter of the room with wall space for signs, leaving the center of the room for student service area representatives. Registration is conducted at the room's entrance, and exit is restricted to allow for maximum flow into the evaluation station.

Materials & Supplies

The Majors Fair requires an extensive array of materials and supplies, some of which may be provided by the event organizers, and some by the campus participants. Cost is certainly one consideration, as is convenience, and a desire for standardization or control. At CSUN, it has been the practice of the event organizers to provide all publicity and signage for the Majors Fair, with table staff from the academic and student affairs areas providing any materials that they wish to distribute or display. The use of creative visual displays is encouraged and it is worthy of note that the displays have become significantly more elaborate over the years. Most areas find that they can use their displays in various open house events throughout the year, and consider the time, energy, and cost expense worthwhile. Publicity materials prior to the event are made available through the college representatives. At CSUN, the event organizers also provide the refreshments, tablecloths (necessary for both coverage & to provide standardization of appearance), personalized nametags (a project requiring a significant amount of effort) for expected staff, and audio-visual equipment if requested in advance. Certainly, the responsibility and expense for any of these items might be distributed to areas other than the event organizers; for example, one office might offer to prepare the nametags or perhaps the signs.

Refreshments

Providing refreshments at the Majors Fair is an excellent way to encourage student attendance and express appreciation to event staff. Including the mention of refreshments in all publicity materials is suggested, and the provision of simple snack foods such as cookies and drinks is usually worth the expenditure of funding. Coffee service will be much appreciated for early-arriving staff members and hot drinks on colder days can be a welcoming feature of the event. Consider individual serving packaged snack foods and fresh fruits which students can easily take with them and which do not require utensils. For campuses with culinary arts programs, consider enlisting the services of the students to showcase their talents to provide some or all of the refreshments. Campus catering services can provide attractive arrangements for beverage service and can be supplemented by warehouse purchases for quantity discounts. Some vendors both on and off campus may be able to provide donated items. A recent addition to the Majors

Fair at CSUN is the provision of simple boxed sandwich lunches for event staff (controlled by limiting serving to those with official nametags) ordered through the campus catering service. Although the cost can be quite significant in providing lunches (approximately $9 per person at CSUN for example), the goodwill generated may be well worth the expense, and may also reduce the need for some staff rotation if the event covers the lunch hour. Be sure to consider in advance any campus rules and regulations concerning the serving or purchasing of food which may impact your event. Plan ahead for disposing of or donating any left-over perishables.

Staff

People are of vital importance in most aspects of the planning and presentation of the Majors Fair. In addition to academic area representatives to interact with the students regarding the various majors and minors, CSUN also includes staffed tables from essential student services such as the Career Center, Counseling, Library, Student Health Center, etc. Participation of academic areas is coordinated by a representative from each of the eight colleges at CSUN, usually a staff member from one of the advisement centers, and often an EOP staff member. The event coordination staff organizes participation of student service areas directly, usually through email communication from the event coordinator to site Directors or previous participants. In addition to the event coordinator, who is at CSUN, a career counselor and academic advisor in the advisement center/EOP satellite office for undecided majors, the Advising Resource Center/EOP, the primary event staff includes 2-4 part-time graduate career interns from the same office supplemented by additional assistance from the office's advisors, peer advisors, and student assistants.

Staff is needed to perform a variety of pre-event tasks including: planning and preparing publicity materials including letters to department chairs; class outreach mailings; distributing and posting event announcements; securing event coverage by the campus newspaper; placing notices in various campus publications; obtaining door prize donations; determining room arrangement and preparing signs; determining and purchasing food and refreshments; preparing tablecloths, name tags, and handout materials; securing funding; and recruiting graduate student and other volunteers to assist on the day of the event.

Day of event tasks are quite complex for an event such as the Majors Fair, and require a staff of approximately 20-25 people. Day of event tasks include: setting out standing posters, banner, and balloons to attract attendees; setting up the room with signs and balloons; arranging stations for faculty and staff check-in, student registration, help/counseling/advising, exit evaluation/door prize entry, food and refreshments; coordinating space assignments and equipment requests. During the event, personnel is needed to staff the various stations, monitor traffic flow and refreshment supplies, and provide technical assistance for equipment, space, and sign problems. Due to the nature of their class schedules, most faculty, staff, and student participants will have rotating assignment times at the event, significantly increasing the numbers of event staff entering and leaving the location. Coordination of rotating schedules in order to insure coverage at all stations can be quite challenging, and it is suggested that schedules be planned in advance and be the sole responsibility of one individual who can be available throughout the day. Stations work well with team leaders who train and supervise the other staff. The Majors Fair at CSUN usually involves the participation of 550-800 people throughout the day: 25-30 general

event staff, 150-175 staffing academic or student service tables, 10 campus administrator visitors, 350-600+ student attendees.

The Majors Fair also involves interaction with a number of campus service staff including those with meeting services, catering, the campus newspaper, sign shop, copying/print services, student government, and campus vendors for door prizes in addition to off-campus vendors for balloons, banner preparation, and additional door prizes contributions. In the early years of the Majors Fair at CSUN, a campus-wide committee was responsible for the event, with many areas involved in the planning and production, and that may remain a feasible model for some campuses. Be aware, however, that committee work can mean a significant amount of time and energy spent in arranging meetings and sometimes decisions need to be made immediately; the designation of a single person or small group housed in one location may prove to be most efficient and effective.

Publicity

Publicity represents one of the most vital elements for success in any event planning process. Without effective publicity, the most outstanding program will not reach its audience and is destined for failure. Because each campus is so unique, knowledge of communication channels as they exist at each college or university is necessary for planning the outreach process, and only very general guidelines can be discussed. It also must be noted that technology and structural changes to the physical layout of the campus may impact established communication patterns, and must be considered and accommodated. For example, at CSUN, wide destruction from the 1994 earthquake has resulted in extensive reconstruction and reconfiguration of the campus with many new buildings and changing traffic patterns. Technology has added new sources of communication on most campuses. At CSUN, the dorm cable TV channel, web site listings, and new closed circuit TV monitors sponsored by the student government all must now be considered in addition to the traditional flyers and posters, newspaper ads, articles, and event notices, newsletter inserts, mailings, class announcements, etc. A general guideline might be to consider every possible venue that can be identified and use as many as possible depending upon budget, time, and energy.

Evaluations & Gathering Data

In order to determine the success of any event, some form of evaluation process is required. Although a qualitative judgment can be obtained by informal observation of the number of attendees, the atmosphere in the room, and overheard interactions, a more quantitative approach to the Majors Fair evaluation can be implemented. At CSUN, attendance is recorded through the use of "contact cards" which each student completes as they enter the event. The cards include the student's name and campus identification number (completed by the student at entry); class standing, major, ethnicity, and EOP program affiliation are completed later through use of the campus computer records system. Through this process, valuable demographic information can be obtained on the student attendees.

To supplement the demographic information provided by the contact cards, an exit evaluation was developed. The exit evaluation addresses issues such as the rationale for attending (to explore majors only, to explore minors only, to explore both majors and minors), publicity

venues which were most effective (how did you know about the Majors Fair - large poster, newspaper ad, flyer from class, etc.?). The exit evaluation also includes the student's name and student identification number in order to permit cross-referencing with the demographic information for a more complete profile and serves as an entry into the door prize drawing. In the interest of traffic flow and consideration for students needing to leave the event for classes, both the entry contact card and the exit evaluation are kept as brief as possible in formats that can be read and responded to quickly. The evaluation form also includes room for a ranked opinion on the usefulness of the Majors Fair (very/some/little help), and a request for suggestions for improvement (what would make the event better?).

The door prize is an important component of the Majors Fair. In addition to expressing appreciation to the students for participating, it provides an incentive to complete the evaluation. The door prizes are obtained from local businesses, are usually valued at $20-50, and are seen as a way to foster community goodwill and as a marketing tool. Door prize sponsors are acknowledged in newspaper ads and on the event program distributed to each attendee. Door prizes can be awarded during or after the event; at CSUN, students are notified by letter during the week following the event and collect their prizes at the coordinating office.

Staff and faculty evaluations of the event are also encouraged, although this remains a component yet to be refined at CSUN. Past practice has involved a printed form sent after the event with thank you letters or inclusion of a request for feedback by email, both of which have resulted in sparse response. Response was understandably greater during the first years of the Majors Fair at CSUN, and perhaps an on-site evaluation process for faculty and staff as well as students might be considered.

Post-Event Tasks

The Majors Fair requires a number of post-event tasks. Once the students and campus representatives have left, supplies must be collected and returned to storage. For supplies such as signs, which can be used for future events, some type of inventory system is useful; at CSUN, numbering and labeling the signs and making their collection the responsibility of the college representatives has worked well. The college representatives are also responsible for compiling a list of the actual participants from their area to facilitate the thank you letter and evaluation process.

Tally of the number of student attendees is also an important post-event task. The contact cards are counted on a rolling basis throughout the event, with the final total communicated by email to the EOP Director for eventual communication to upper administration. The graduate interns complete the contact card demographic information which is added to the evaluation results in a one-page summary of data. The data report is included with the personalized thank you letter sent to each faculty, staff, and student representative; copies are also sent to the individual's immediate supervisor or, in case of students, department chair. Although this is a very time-consuming task, it is an expectation at CSUN, and is certainly worth consideration in terms of building support and maintaining goodwill for any event on any campus. A more detailed data summary is prepared for the EOP Director and selected campus members. Thank you letters are also sent to all campus visitors and event supporters, including off-campus door prize donors and

supply vendors. An extra personal touch at CSUN is the distribution of small candy thank you gifts to the college representatives, the event staff, and volunteers by the event coordinator.

Closure of the financial files for the Majors Fair is the final event task. Bills from campus and off-campus vendors often take some time to be received, and the payment processing system often involves complicated procedures and the observation of deadlines for use of funds. It is advisable to become aware of any policies and procedures far in advance of the event and to be prepared for the financial issues to linger (sometimes from one year's event to the next).

Summary & Conclusions

The Majors Fair has proven to be a popular and useful event for colleges and universities interested in assisting their students with major selection in a convenient, one-stop setting. The model presented from California State University, Northridge has proven itself over the past four years, and can be adapted to a wide range of institutions.

Although the Majors Fair requires a significant expenditure of time, resources, and energy, as well as organizational skill, the benefit to students has certainly been evident at CSUN. We hope that you will also be inspired to help your students get the information they need for major decision-making in this very effective way.

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Appendix A

CSUN Majors Fair Planning Timeline

Date of Event: Wednesday, February 27, 2002 (5th week of Spring Semester)

September 2001	Identify event date & reserve room
	Begin date announcements
	Create "Save the Date" announcement flyer
	Draft & submit budget proposal
	Review previous year's event evaluations
	Identify campus college representatives
	Begin graduate student volunteer recruitment
October 2001	Send announcement letter to Department Chairs
	Draft Associated Students budget proposal & develop sponsorship & strategy plan
	Plan pre-event workshops
	Attend Council of Chairs Meeting for event announcement & distribute notice of college representatives
November 2001	Submit Associated Students budget proposal
	Present A.S. budget proposal to Finance Committee
	Lobby for A.S. budget proposal support
	Confirm A.S. budget support
	Confirm Departmental participation through college representatives with table & sign requests (before semester ends)
December 2001	Order banners, signs, office supplies
	Develop mailing & publicity materials
	Order "save the date" notice for Finals Week newspaper edition
January 2002	Identify classes for direct mailing
	Prepare class mailing (20,000 flyers)
	Prepare & distribute large posters to dorms
	Distribute/post flyers on campus before beginning of Spring semester
	Prepare newspaper ads for welcome week edition & future weeks
	Contact student service areas for participation
	Place refreshment & balloon orders; cut tablecloths
	Develop & begin door prize outreach
February 2002	
2 weeks before	Confirm department & student service participation
	Confirm & prepare signs; confirm AV equipment requests
	Confirm staffing & volunteer plan; collect door prizes
	Present pre-event workshops
1 week before	Send out direct & class mailings to students
week of event	Final publicity including newspaper insert (8,000 flyers)
	Confirm names & prepare nametags
February 27	MAJORS FAIR 2002
March 2002	Complete demographic information on student attendees
	Notify winners & distribute door prizes
April 2002	Prepare & send thank you letters with summary report
	Process payment of bills